

*“So close, yet so far away
So close, yet so far away
We believe in tomorrow, but we’re stuck in
today
Baby we’re so close, so close, so far away”
— Daryl Hall and John Oates*

Spring is here! We can tell because of the flush of new beekeepers asking the same first-year questions that have been asked ever since Langstroth invented the moveable-frame hive. Keep it up! If we don’t ask, we’ll never learn. This is also the time when we hear the lament of quite a few folks doing their first in-depth inspections of the season and finding that their colonies starved to death overwinter despite having large honey stores. What’s up with that?

While this may be a good “preparing for winter” topic, it bears emphasizing now while the sting still hurts. Maybe we can start planning for fall prep and avoid this tragedy next spring.

The classic scenario is that we’ve got a respectable colony going into winter which is reasonably heavy with honey stores. But come spring, the colony is dead, with a thick pile of bee corpses on the bottom board as well as many clustered in contiguous cells in what remains of the brood nest, with heads-in/butts out. We know this is the telltale sign of starvation. But wait, there are patches of honey remaining in the hive, perhaps even the better part of an upper box full of capped honey! What killed those bees? Surely it wasn’t starvation if they had adequate honey stores?

The answer is yes, those poor bees starved even though their hive contained the honey that could have kept them alive. It is tempting to blame bad luck, bad circumstances or bad beekeeping; maybe all three have a role. Regardless of who is to blame, how can this happen?

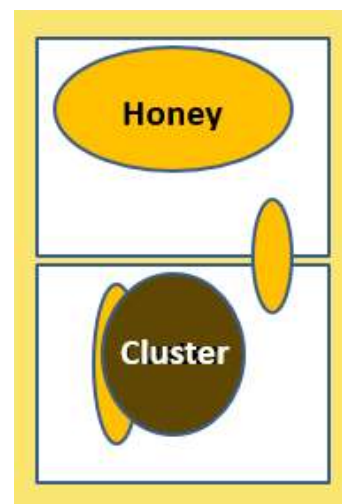
Honey is the fuel for a cluster’s heat production. So not only must bees have honey to avoid starvation in the conventional sense, they must have it in order for the cluster to maintain the “heat engines” that provide life-giving heat to brood and also for basic bee tasks



These bees starved over winter (some on the comb and some inside cells) even though they were only an inch or two away from the honey they so desperately needed. Note that the dead bees are around brood, which they would typically never abandon. Photo: Lloyd Frick

such as locomotion. In our case, there clearly was a stretch of very cold weather which forced the doomed colony into a tight cluster over the brood nest. There was honey underneath the cluster, but it was a honey oasis, not connected to other stores. Once the honey under the cluster was completely consumed, the cluster could not move over empty cells to find another spot... how would they even know that such a spot existed if it is too cold for them to break cluster? The tragic conclusion was that they starved even though life-sustaining honey was mere inches away. An inch is as good as a mile when there is no way to get to it.

This situation is sad, but let’s dry our tears and figure out how to prevent it. The fundamental problem is that when the colony was forced into a tight cluster, the footprint of the cluster was not over sufficient honey to sustain it. See the diagram to the right: the honey under the cluster isn’t enough to keep the colony functioning once it is completely consumed, and



there is no overlapping honey patch that could serve as a gateway to more stores.

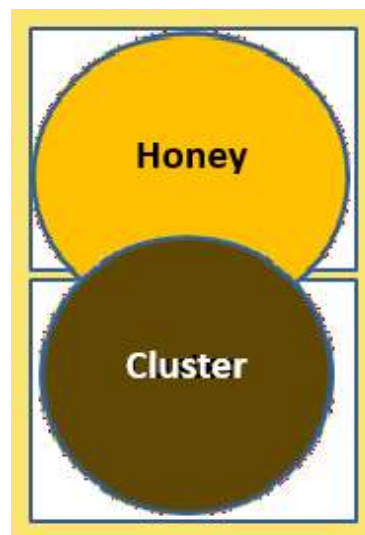
What can be done? The problem can be solved in one of two ways (or ideally, a combination of the two):

1. Sufficiently increase the footprint of the cluster
2. Sufficiently increase the footprint of the honey stores

The cluster footprint can be increased by such things as following Good Beekeeping Practices to keep the colony healthy (notably, by controlling Varroa mite infestations), transferring brood in early fall from abundantly-supplied hives to ones that could use a boost, preventing late-season swarming and combining weak colonies with strong ones. The honey footprint can be increased by borrowing stores from other hives that have an excess supply and by generously feeding sugar syrup in the fall while the bees still have time to properly cure and store it. See "[Controlling Winter Losses](#)" and "[A Few More Wintering Tips](#)" for suggestions regarding equalizing colonies and fall feeding.

As with most beekeeping issues, prevention of "freak" starvation in the presence of honey stores requires that we think ahead and ensure that our bees have what they'll need to address challenges such as this. If we anticipate potential problems and then give our colonies the resources they need to handle them in the way that they know best, we become partners in success rather than stumbling blocks.

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A large, contiguous honey footprint and a large cluster should be the solution for bees being trapped over empty comb.